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BOARD OF
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SPECIAL MEMORANDUM

The AD Split and Venezuelan Democracy

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2 August 1968
No. 18-68

Approved For Release 2006/08/10 : CIA-RDP79R00967A000800020007-5

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C E N T R A L I N T E L L I G E N C E A G E N C Y

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

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SUBJECT: The AD Split and Venezuelan Democracy*

Late last year, Luis Beltran Prieto, one of the most popular leaders of the Democratic Action (AD) Party, bolted the party, apparently carrying with him a large part of the former AD faithful, and launched his candidacy for the presidential election of December 1968. This split in the AD Party threatens the end of its domination of Venezuelan politics and raises questions about the future of constitutional democracy. Over the past decade of AD rule, neither leftist insurgents nor disgruntled rightists in the military have been able to upset the progress of civilian, reformist government. Presidents Betancourt and Leoni both were able to get their measures through Congress with reasonable ease, at least during the opening years of their administrations. But the forthcoming election now is likely to be contested closely by at least four presidential candidates and seven or so congressional slates, and the next president will face the difficult problem of organizing an effective coalition government. If the new administration (March 1969) is hampered from the start by uncertain control of Congress, leftist insurgents and, of potentially graver significance, interventionists in the military would be likely to become more active. 25X1

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1. To most foreign observers the AD Party and the development of constitutional government in Venezuela are almost synonymous. Since their student days in the 1920s, its members ("Adecos") have been primarily responsible for Venezuela's metamorphosis from what Simón Bolívar called a "barracks" to a constitutional democracy. AD's Rómulo Betancourt was the first freely elected president in Venezuelan history to serve out his term (1959-1963), and turn his office over to a freely elected successor; Raul Leoni, also an Adeco, is now in the fifth and final year of his term. Both administrations have not only been successful in placating potential military interventionists and combating Communist and Castroist guerrillas, but have also used the country's abundant petroleum resources to foster social and economic reforms. In short, AD governments have provided the population with a relatively high degree of economic prosperity and political tranquillity, at least by the standards of this generally troubled continent. Yet despite this, as the election of December 1968 approaches, AD faces the possibility of being voted out of office.

2. The AD's fall from favor has not been a sudden but a gradual process. Over the years it has lost ground with the voters both through the defection of important elements from the party and through the emergence of well organized competing parties. It

slipped from an 80 percent majority of the popular vote in the election of 1945,* to a 49 percent plurality in 1958, and from there to 33 percent in 1963. Despite its minority status since 1958, it has been able to govern relatively effectively in coalition with one or more of the other parties. Even when formally in the opposition, these parties, fully cognizant of the tender roots of constitutionalism in Venezuela, have generally been more constructive than opposition groups in most Latin American countries.

3. Reflecting both his personality and the political demands of his situation in Congress, President Leoni has been a compromiser rather than a crusader like his illustrious predecessor. Yet he has guided the country reasonably well through a difficult period: when he took office the insurgents were still a relatively potent force, and many military officers were not yet reconciled to the concept of civilian rule. His government's resolution in prosecuting the counterguerrilla effort has had the effect of sharply reducing the size and effectiveness of the insurgency and gaining the confidence

* In 1945, when the AD and junior military officers overthrew the remnants of the longlived and notorious Gomez dictatorship, the AD presidential candidate, Rómulo Gallegos, faced little in the way of organized political opposition. In 1948, however, he was thrown out of office by Pérez Jiménez, whose military dictatorship lasted ten years.

of the military to the extent that serious coup plotting has noticeably diminished. He has also continued and augmented social programs begun under Betancourt. To many, however, Leoni personifies the image of "bueyes cansados" (tired oxen) that the AD has acquired with the passage of time. Despite its strength with organized workers and peasants, the party has not yet been able to attract much support from two elements which play key roles in elections: the slumdwellers of Caracas and the new voters of age 18 and over.

4. Concern within the party gradually led to the emergence of a faction seeking to return the AD to its old militancy. Over the past two years, the conflict between these Adecos and the party wheelhorses grew more bitter. A party split became inevitable in September - October 1967 when the leading challenger, Luis Beltran Prieto, demonstrated his popularity by winning an overwhelming victory in a series of party "primaries" for presidential aspirants. When the AD's executive committee remained unyielding in its efforts to sidetrack Prieto's candidacy, he bolted the party, established his own political vehicle, the People's Electoral Movement (MEP), and at least initially won the allegiance of a large number of the former AD faithful.

5. Betancourt, the man most responsible for AD's rise, during this sequence of events was a promoter not of party unity but of the movement to block Prieto's candidacy at all costs. Unlike other political leaders after their terms of office, Betancourt had sought to minimize his influence on his successor by living abroad in self-imposed exile. His influence was further minimized by the law that disqualifies former presidents for two terms after leaving office. Nonetheless, he has not lost interest in internal AD politics. Possibly because he is looking toward the election of 1973 and wanted party control to center around his old cronies, or more probably because of his distaste for the men around Prieto, Betancourt returned to Venezuela to stop the Prieto surge, and secure the AD nomination for his friend, Gonzalo Barrios.

6. Superficially, the AD split appears to represent an ideological schism between a rather doctrinaire socialist wing (personified by Prieto) and more practical men like Barrios and Betancourt who, in order to facilitate economic development, have tempered their attitudes toward private domestic and foreign investment. Most Venezuelan commentators are inclined, however, to see the split as largely a reflection of conflicting personal ambitions and old personal grudges; according to this view, Prieto and Barrios

administrations would not differ appreciably in policy. More than anything else, it seems to be their political images that set them apart. In contrast to the suave European-educated Barrios (who nonetheless cuts an awkward figure on the stump), Prieto, a mulatto, is more the man of the people. Almost Lincolnesque in his homeliness, Prieto has portrayed himself as an "old fashioned Adeco" with an overriding concern for social justice.

7. In any case, the AD split has given new hope to the other parties. Rafael Caldera of the Christian Democrats (COPEI), in his fourth and perhaps final run for the presidency, is hopeful of improving on the 20 percent of the vote he got in 1963. The leaders of three parties, who together received 44 percent of the presidential vote under separate candidacies in that election, have recently united behind an attractive but relatively unknown aspirant, Miguel Ángel Burelli. It is unlikely that the coalition will again take such a percentage of the vote, especially since each party plans to run independent congressional slates.*

* The three are Arturo Uslar Pietri's generally right-of-center National Democratic Front, Admiral Wolfgang Larrazabal's left-of-center Popular Democratic Front, and Jóvito Villalba's centrist Democratic Republic Union.

8. We foresee a closely contested election; prediction of the winner would be hazardous at this time, if only because of the possibility that Venezuela's amoeba-like political movements may split or readhere in still new combinations. At present, each of the four candidates has his own particular strengths. Caldera's COPEI has the strongest youth movement and has recently acquired the backing of a major newspaper chain. Burelli's coalition has access to the financial support of the business community and to the stump appeal of two former candidates who did very well in Caracas. MEP's Prieto is reputedly also popular in the ranchitos of the capital city and has carried out of the AD party a wealth of political talent, if not of actual supporters on election day. Finally, the AD under Barrios probably retains the backing of peasant organizations, and its control of the goverrment and patronage will be advantageous.

9. As things now stand, the winning candidate will gain only a spare plurality of the vote, probably little more than 25 percent. He will have to follow the recent Venezuelan practice of governing by coalition, but because of the relatively small size of his own following in Congress (again it is unlikely to be much more than one-fourth the total members), he will probably have a

very difficult time coming to terms with potential partners. Unlike the AD in 1958, and to a lesser extent in 1963, the president will not be acting from a position of relative strength but may have to deal with runnerups who lost only by a few percentage points. The jostling for cabinet positions and other patronage may place enervating strains on any government as well as on the leading party. Similar strains could also exacerbate divisions within the other parties. The partners in the Burelli coalition have little in common save opportunism, while within COPEI a growing conflict between older, traditional Catholics and youthful radicals has only been papered over for the election. Finally, there probably will be a sharp struggle for leadership within either AD or MEP, depending upon which party does more poorly in the election.

10. There will be some possible saving graces for any future government. Oil revenues will probably remain fairly constant over the next couple of years. All the parties will probably be in essential agreement on most major lines of policy and all, or nearly all, will be anxious to protect the constitutional system from its enemies on the far left and right. Nonetheless, the problem of forging an effective coalition may prove overwhelming,

and political frustration and even total stagnation of congressional action may characterize the new government from its start. Under these circumstances, the next administration would be hamstrung in its efforts to move forward against the complex social and economic problems still outstanding in Venezuela: housing, education, jobs, improvement in rural conditions. Also, intense political bickering could produce blatantly chauvinistic action on a number of already nagging problems in foreign relations: the border dispute with Guyana and the dispute with the US over Venezuela's share of US imports of petroleum.

11. There looms thus the possibility, and for the present it is only a possibility, that the AD split could lead to a serious weakening of political democracy in what has been one of its few showcases in Latin America. If civilian constitutional government demonstrates that it cannot cope with Venezuela's problems, leftist extremists would be encouraged to try to step up the insurgency. Of potentially graver significance, in reaction to this, or to the general political malaise, some military leader might decide that the civilians are incapable of running the country after all. Most military officers have been concentrating on professional rather than political matters in

recent years. Unfortunately, Venezuela's great wealth, which has facilitated the reform measures of the constitutionalists, makes control of the government a tempting prize for a would-be military caudillo, just as it is for Communists, Castroists, and other revolutionaries.

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FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:

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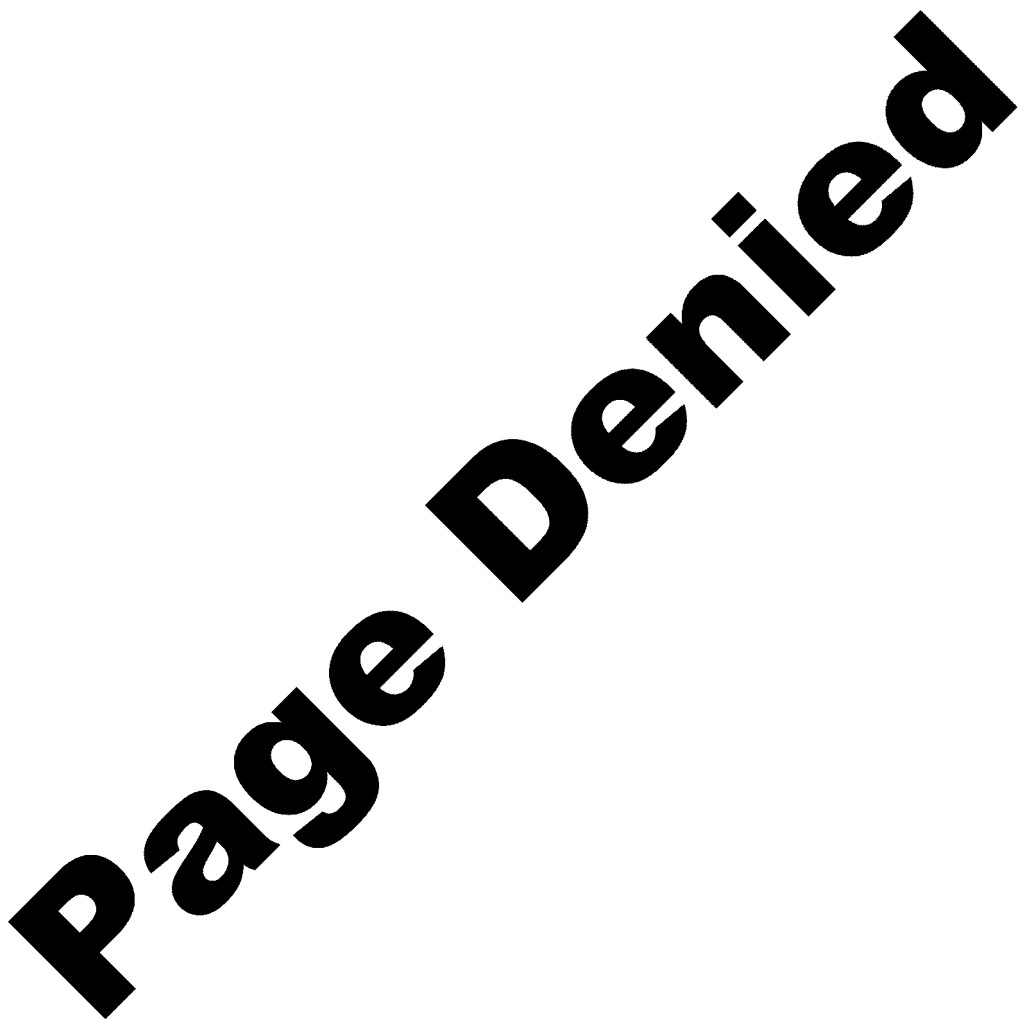
Chairman



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